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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses cooperative learning as a teaching method that uses intrinsic rewards, or rewards that come from within a student, in the education of young children. The developmental perspective of cooperative learning, which suggests that peer interaction, without the use of extrinsic rewards, leads to intellectual and social growth, is based on the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget. This perspective is supported by a growing body of evidence indicating that extrinsic rewards are detrimental to creative functioning. To foster cooperative learning, teachers can: (1) present children with developmentally appropriate activities; (2) encourage social interaction; (3) have children work with peers of mixed abilities; (4) develop activities which provide children with hands-on experience; (5) involve children in the learning process; and (6) provide interesting and open-ended activities. Teachers can follow these seven guidelines by using a project approach to learning in the classroom. The project approach capitalizes on children's differing abilities, revolves around a theme, and allows for an open-ended learning process. The benefits of cooperative learning include stressing cooperation over competition, developing social skills, and providing opportunities for the handicapped child to make a contribution to the group. A list of 14 references is provided. (BC)

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COOPERATIVE LEARNING: THEORY TO PRACTICE IN THE YOUNG CHILD'S CLASSROOM

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Cooperative Learning:
Theory to Practice in the Young Child's Classroom

Cooperative learning is used in classrooms to promote achievement and motivate students. Much research has been done concerning cooperative learning in the fields of education, psychology, sociology and anthropology. Much of the research in the field of education has involved students in third grade and above and dealt with its effects on student achievement, peer interaction, race relations and cooperation vs. competition (Johnson & Johnson;1987, Slavin, 1987). Two broad viewpoints have developed. One is the motivational perspective dealing with the use of extrinsic rewards (coming from outside) and the other is the developmental view, involving intrinsic rewards (coming from within). Cooperative learning is presented here as an intrinsically rewarding teaching method with guidelines for its use in the classroom of young children.

Developmental Perspective

The developmental perspective of cooperative learning is based on the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget. Simply stated it implies that social interaction among children doing developmentally appropriate tasks will increase their understanding of skills and concepts. This view includes the young child aged four to six years. Vygotsky views much of children's learning as occurring through feedback derived from social interaction. He argues that social interaction is the key to learning how to think and learn and that social interaction improves a child's ability to gain and

understand new knowledge (Wood, 1988). This theory supports the view that cooperative learning techniques in the young child's classroom can provide addition social interaction necessary for the child to learn and understand.

Piaget's theory coincides with Vygotsky's theory regarding social interaction as a major force in the development of skills and concepts. Piagetian theory regards the young child as egocentric or unable to take another's point of view. Piaget holds that the ability to take another's point of view (without losing one's own) is gradually acquired through repeated social interactions in which the child is exposed again and again to the viewpoints of others. Kamii & Devries (1988) assert that between the ages of five and six years old, children begin to decenter and view themselves in relation to others. They are able to play games which require cooperation and agreement on rules. Cooperation takes place in the making of rules which govern the game and negotiations must be made for rules which are acceptable to all.

Another important aspect of Piaget's theory is the impact of social interaction on cognitive and moral development. For Piaget, social understanding begins with the interaction in which persons compare, contrast and confront one another with their own thinking. The thought that each takes away is not a private understanding but the result of the interaction. Piaget argued that this collaboration was more likely to be accomplished during the give and take of peer interaction then when a child deals with an adult, because children are less likely to disagree with and present their own ideas to an adult (Trudge & Caruso, 1988). Sullivan (1977), working with Piaget's theories developed a thesis of general

social development for the 5-7 year old. The Sullivan-Piaget thesis describes this age child in two types of social interactions. The child-child interaction which involves cooperation and mutual understanding and the child-adult interaction which involves a less cooperative, mutual understanding. In the child-adult interaction, the child who attempts to get along with the more powerful person, eventually adopts the appropriate role in the exchange. The child-child relationship involves more of an equal exchange. This equal exchange would more likely occur during cooperative learning activities as opposed to traditional teacher-directed activities.

Motivational Factors

Theory following the lines of the developmental perspective suggests that peer action alone, without the use of goals or extrinsic rewards, can lead to intellectual and social growth. The question that arises is whether quality peer interactions and enhanced learning can be sustained for long periods in the young child's classroom without the use of rewards. If cooperative learning methods are employed based on the developmental perspective, it must be assumed that within the child is the ability to sustain an activity or a goal in the absence of expected rewards for long periods of time and that the child will remain intrinsically motivated. Recent research has been conducted involving interests and rewards. Hunter and Barker (1987) have studied the effect of reward on children's concept of personal effort. They point out that when rewards are given in an obvious manner, children have no choice but to feel their efforts are due to an external force. If rewards are not obvious, children can feel their efforts are due to their own motivation and that they have control.

Another experiment, dealing with ideation fluency (number of ideas) in preschoolers, showed negative effects on a group receiving rewards for performance. Groves, Sawyers and Morgan (1987) showed that children in

a rewarded group scored lower than children in the nonrewarded groups. This supports the growing body of evidence that rewards are detrimental to creative functioning. Boggiano and Main (1986) showed the effects of a bonus or reward based on a contingency (after you do this then you can do that) decreased the value of the latter activity. The growing body of research has strong implications for the careful use of reward as a motivational factor when dealing with young children. This applies to activities which young children find appealing. Since children are generally interested in new activities, the practice of introducing tangible rewards to sustain their interest would be unnecessary. The effect on a child, of constantly seeking a reward, whether tangible or in the form of praise, from early childhood on, may diminish interest in learning and the challenge of learning (Katz & Chard,1989).

Guidelines for Cooperative Learning In the Early Childhood Classroom

Working with the previous research presented, guidelines can be formed for cooperative learning methods in the young child's classroom. These guidelines for cooperative learning in the classroom are based on guidelines for cooperative problem solving in the classroom (Trudge & Caruso, 1988). The guidelines are as follows:

1. Present children with developmentally appropriate activities. Everyday activities or those involving the child's immediate environment are recommended. Activities based on shared experiences within the child's classroom can enhance the sense of cooperation and involvement.

2. Encourage social interaction and the exchange of ideas. The room arrangements, placement of materials and time allowances promote involvement in the shared activities.

3. Have children work with peers of mixed abilities to incorporate different experiences, learning styles and approaches. Mixed ability groups will help children accept themselves and others. Young children are aware of their group and judge themselves based on that grouping.

4. Develop activities which provide the children with opportunities to have concrete "hands on" experiences with immediate feedback. When children see the results of their work, they are more likely to be motivated to continue trying their ideas.

5. Children should be actively involved in the learning process. Group involvement in an activity helps children to adapt their thinking to others views.

6. The activity should be interesting. Intrinsically interesting activities and the children's involvement are more likely to creates their own reward.

7. Involve children in open-ended activities in which they can determine their own objectives. The teacher should present activities involving divergent thinking (many solutions) rather than convergent thinking (one solution).

The Project Approach

Katz & Chard (1989), in their book, Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach, present a model which can be used to incorporate the methods of cooperative learning. Through this approach, the seven guidelines presented can be easily introduced into the classroom. The authors suggest the project approach is especially designed for children from four years old to eight years old. The approach utilizes teaching children of different ages and different abilities. The approach is suited to capitalize on differences among the children in a mixed group.

The approach revolves around a theme or unit with which the children can relate and in which they are interested. The depth of the study depends upon the abilities and the interests of the group. Children can work independently and share with the rest of the group or the children can engage in cooperative learning. Many different facets of the curriculum are included in the unit of study. Music, art, language, math, science, the dramatic play area, the block area and any other curriculum area may be incorporated into the unit of study.

The approach is very open-ended in that it allows for both divergent thinking and convergent thinking. For example, in doing a unit on dinosaurs, a group of children may be responsible for finding information on particular dinosaurs. Their objective is to match pictures of dinosaurs in their books and to determine if each dinosaur is a plant eater or a meat eater. This group will use convergent thinking to arrive at one correct answer for each question. Continuing the unit, the same group of children may be asked to devise a play of a dinosaur family. This is an example of an open-ended activity and would allow for divergent thinking.

Project work takes into account the acquisition of knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings. The example of the dinosaur activities reinforces previously learned knowledge (what is a meat eater; what is a plant eater) and works on the development of skills such as classifying, identification, pairing, distinguishing, recognizing and defining. Also due to the cooperative group format, activities facilitate social competence in areas such as sharing, guiding, following, and cooperating.

This approach is not a new approach and is utilized in many classrooms. Variations of it have been used by many teachers in many countries for some time. The nature of the project approach is informal and uses an integrated curriculum approach.

Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Cooperation is the opposite of competition which dominates most traditional classrooms. Therefore, cooperative learning can promote social skills needed in group work as opposed to individual work. Skills such as leadership behavior, communication, and conflict management become the social skills emphasized. A new type of social competence will dominate the classroom where all children become winners. Motivation will be high as self esteem rises and belonging to a group becomes a source of pride (McDanial, 1984).

Another benefit of the cooperative framework is that which goes to the mainstreamed child. Within a classroom, grouping heterogeneously provides a place for the child with a handicapping condition. Cooperative learning makes use of the child's strengths and deals with the child's weaknesses as he/she becomes a part of the group. Differences can be accommodated for and all children will not be expected to function at the same level (Shapon-Sheven, 1978).

Summary

These guidelines presented maintain developmentally appropriate practices in the early childhood classrooms as suggested by the National Association for the Education of Young Chidren (Bredekamp, 1987). Stressing cooperative learning experiences and group projects would be appealing to the young child and valuable in building a sense of community. These are important qualities in the educational curriculum of the developing child.

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